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ABSTRACT

Reforms suggested in several major national assessments of secondary education have led to the development of a number of experiential, community-based programs for secondary students. Experience-Based Career Education offers such programs to over 15,000 students in all 50 states. Of these, 218 students from five states were administered an Experiential Learning Questionnaire developed using the critical incidents method, open-ended questions, and rating scales based on propositions derived from Social Learning Theory. The questionnaire revealed what the students regarded as the qualities distinguishing excellent learning experiences from those generating little learning. Among demographic variables considered in the testing process, only sex showed consistent discrimination among responses. Results indicated that opportunities for assuming personal responsibility and for learning things not previously anticipated, as well as the existence of informal rather than formal relationships with adults at the field experience site, were marked characteristics of high level learning experiences. This document concludes with several recommendations concerning program design, the role of the community resource person, and future research. (Author/PGD)

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Investigating Student Perceptions of Essential Elements of Experiential Education[1]

by

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Since 1970 five major national reports have criticized public secondary education for failing to provide today's youth with a meaningful education that develops a sense of responsibility (Zajchowski, 1978). Reforms suggested in these five reports include a more effective use of the community as a place of learning, recognition of alternative paths to a diploma and ways of helping students become responsible for planning, carrying out and assessing their learning progress. These recommendations for reform have led to the development of a number of experiential, community based programs for secondary students.

Morris Keeton (1978) has pointed out the necessity for nontraditional programs to provide quality assurance in order to maintain credibility with accrediting bodies, government funding agencies, faculty, students and, ultimately, the public. Efforts to evaluate the outcomes of the various types of programs, however, have been hampered by a lack of knowledge about the characteristics of experiential education programs which make them successful learning experiences. In a recent study Silberman (1978) noted that "There have been virtually no studies that tease apart the treatment components and try to specify crucial variables that make the field experience more or less effective." (p. 4).

Questions which appear important to address if we in experiential education are going to improve learning opportunities for young people today include: What distinguishes an excellent learning experience in the community from a "no learning" experience? What characteristics do they associate with excellent learning experiences or with "no learning" experiences? What happens in the community that contributes to such

experiences? Do young men's and women's perceptions of excellent and poor learning experiences differ?

In an effort to provide answers to the above questions an exploratory study was designed and conducted last spring by the Education and Work Program at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) in Portland, Oregon. Over the past seven years NWREL, in conjunction with the National Institute of Education and three other regional educational laboratories, has been heavily involved in developing and validating an experiential education program called Experience-Based Career Education (EBCE). EBCE provides over 15,000 high school and college students in all 50 states (Spotts, 1978) with a vital full or part-time educational program that integrates academic learning, career experiences and life skill development through direct, supervised learning experiences in the community (Hagans, 1976). It was designed and is being used to serve a full cross-section of students ranging from potential drop-outs to gifted and talented students.

A review of the literature on experiential learning convinced us that a foundation exists upon which to design a useful study. John Dewey (1950) has pointed out that not all experiences are learning experiences. For example some experiences may be simply a routine repetition of other experiences (Geiger, 1978); the learner may fail to realize the meaning or significance of an experience (Combs, Avila and Purkey, 1971), its relationship to other experiences or to previously learned concepts (Friedlander, 1965). Bandura (1977) and others developing Social Learning Theory have identified factors such as role modeling and reinforcement which research has shown to be related to

increased learning (Krumboltz, Mitchell and Jones, 1976; Silberman and Hanelin, 1978).

METHOD

Using critical incidents technique, open-ended questions and rating scales based on propositions derived from Social Learning Theory, a questionnaire was designed, pilot tested and revised.

The revised Experiential Learning Questionnaire[1] was administered to 218 students in eight EBCE programs covering five states--Alaska, Georgia, Michigan, Oregon and Washington. EBCE students provided a good population for this study since each student is usually involved in both short term career explorations at three to six community sites and longer term learning projects at one or several locations. Thus the same students would have been exposed to various sites and would be in a good position to assess qualities associated with locations providing excellent or poor learning experiences.

Forty-eight percent of the students in this study were in 12th grade, 40 percent in 11th grade and the rest in grades 8 through 10. Fifty-six percent of the students were female. Students reflected a wide range of academic ability. Other information obtained for each student included length of time in the EBCE program and career preference classified by Holland's six career types and by Hollingshead's scale of socioeconomic status. Of these characteristics, only sex showed consistent discrimination among responses.

[1]Readers interested in receiving a copy of the instrument used in this study may obtain it by writing to the authors at NWREL, Education and Work Program, 710 S. W. Second Avenue, Portland, OR 97204.

RESULTS

Excellent Learning Experiences

Respondents were first asked to "think about the learning experience in the community this year that helped you learn the most about yourself, your relationships with other people or about a career of interest to you." In response to an open-ended question asking, "What did you learn?", students most frequently said a better understanding of a specific career, of other people and themselves. Table 1 shows the categories of responses by sex. It is interesting to note that significantly ($X^2=14.55$, $p < .005$) more females than males identified better understanding of others as a learning outcome. In addition, more females also felt they had a better understanding of themselves, although this result was not statistically significant.

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS BY SEX IDENTIFYING WHAT THEY LEARNED FROM THEIR POSITIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

	Percentage of Respondents	
	Males (N=84)	Females (N=111)
Better understanding of a specific career	58	44
Better understanding of others	20	48
Better understanding of self	24	37
Better understanding of various careers	16	17
Other answers	8	4

Students were next asked, "What things happened at the site that made it an excellent learning experience?" Table 2 indicates that "the opportunity to actually try out the work" was given most frequently by students. "Help given by the people there" and "the personality of the people" were the next most frequently given responses.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS BY SEX IDENTIFYING WHAT THINGS HAPPENED AT A SITE THAT MADE IT AN EXCELLENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE

	Percentage of Respondents	
	Males (N=84)	Females (N=111)
Trying out the work myself	58	45
Help given by the people there	23	34
Personality of the people there	25	29
Listening and talking with adults there	18	20
Being given adult responsibility	19	13
Interest/challenge of the job	13	9

A list of 19 possible reasons that may help make a particular community experience an excellent learning opportunity for a student was presented. Students were asked to decide how important each possible reason was, for them, and to indicate by circling a number from 5 (extremely important) to 1 (not important). Table 3 lists the reasons selected in descending order of their perceived importance.

TABLE 3
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF IMPORTANCE OF VARIOUS REASONS THAT A PARTICULAR COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE WAS AN EXCELLENT LEARNING OPPORTUNITY
(N=212)

	Reasons	Mean*	Standard Deviation
1.	Trying out the work myself	4.42	.77
2.	Being given real responsibility	4.18	.81
3.	Listening and talking with people at the site	4.17	.86
4.	Clear directions to follow	4.15	.88
5.	Challenging tasks	4.06	.77
6.	Applying the learning to new things	4.04	.90
7.	Observing skilled workers doing certain tasks	4.02	.86
8.	Encouragement from other workers for doing tasks well	4.00	.94
9.	Interesting nature of the tasks	3.95	.90
10.	Learning the technical words and language associated with a career	3.90	.98
11.	Freedom to explore areas not planned in advance	3.87	.95
12.	Supervisor took a personal interest in me	3.82	.99
13.	Adequate amount of time at the site	3.75	.96
14.	Encouragement from family or friends	3.62	1.17
15.	Knowing ahead of time what will be expected of me	3.59	1.22
16.	Discussing my experiences with staff	3.35	1.13
17.	Discussing my experiences with other students	3.34	1.13
18.	Close adult supervision	2.59	1.05
19.	Easy tasks	2.14	1.06

*On a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important.)

The results are quite consistent with those obtained from the open-ended questions (The Cronbach's alpha reliability of these 19 items was .89). "Trying out the work myself" was listed as most important while "easy tasks" was listed as least important. This latter category was used because prior research indicated that "easy tasks" were not related to quality learning opportunities. The results of this study confirmed that finding.

'No Learning' Experiences

In answer to the question, "What things happened at a site to make it a 'no learning' experience?" the most frequent reason given by students was that they did not like the activities there. When analyzed by students' sex as shown in Table 4, it is interesting to note that significantly more females than males ($X^2=5.22$, $p < .05$) indicated a factor was that people at the site were not friendly. When asked, "What things, if any, could have been done to make a site a more useful learning experience?" the most frequent responses were to provide more "on the job" experiences and that community site people should be more helpful. In addition, females were significantly ($X^2=6.29$, $p < .05$) more likely to give the latter response than males.

TABLE 4

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS BY SEX IDENTIFYING WHAT MADE A SITE A "NO LEARNING" EXPERIENCE

	Percentage of Respondents	
	Males (N=84)	Females (N=111)
Don't like the activities	44	46
People were not helpful	15	22
Not enough "on the job" time	16	14
Lack of interest in the career	12	8
People there weren't friendly	3	14
People were too busy for me	3	5
Too much paperwork	2	0

A list of 20 possible reasons that may have caused a particular community experience to result in little or no learning was presented to the students. The Cronbach's alpha reliability on this scale of 20 items was quite high (.94). Students were asked to decide how significant each reason was in keeping them from learning by circling a number from 5 (extremely significant) to 1 (not significant). Table 5 lists the reasons selected in order of perceived significance. Reasons given the highest ratings were boring tasks, no opportunity to try out the work, too much repetition of the activity and no opportunity to explore other areas of interest. Again there is verification that the level of difficulty of a task is not a major deterrent to learning.

TABLE 5

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SIGNIFICANCE OF VARIOUS REASONS THAT A PARTICULAR COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE RESULTED IN LITTLE OR NO LEARNING
(N=212)

	Reasons	Mean*	S.D.
1.	Boring tasks	3.57	1.34
2.	No opportunity to try out the work myself	3.40	1.40
3.	Too much repetition of the activity	3.36	1.30
4.	No opportunity to explore other areas of interest	3.36	1.35
5.	No opportunity to apply the learning to new things	3.31	1.32
6.	Didn't know what would be expected of me	3.30	1.25
7.	No recognition from other workers for doing tasks well	3.20	1.33
8.	No opportunity to talk to workers at the site	2.98	1.36
9.	No opportunity to observe skilled workers doing the tasks	2.94	1.44
10.	Lack of clear directions to follow	2.91	1.31
11.	No opportunity to discuss my experiences with others	2.67	1.26
12.	Too closely supervised	2.60	1.21
13.	Criticism of me or my work by persons at the site	2.57	1.35
14	Ignored by my supervisor	2.56	1.49
15.	Not enough time at site	2.56	1.36
16.	Not enough supervision	2.54	1.28
17.	Disliked by my supervisor	2.44	1.41
18.	Could not understand the words or language used at the site	2.26	1.25
19.	Discouraged by family or friends	2.13	1.37
20.	Tasks were too difficult	2.08	1.34

*On a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important).

A factor analysis of the 19 reasons associated with an excellent learning experience combined with 20 reasons associated with a poor learning experience produced a general factor accounting for 48 percent of the total variance and a positive versus negative factor adding 23 percent to the total variance accounted for. On this second factor all reasons hypothesized to be associated with an excellent experience produced a positive factor loading while those hypothesized to be associated with a poor learning experience produced a negative factor loading. This principal component factor analysis confirmed that our list of reasons were properly grouped.

Factors Differentiating Types of Experience

A t test was run to determine if significant differences existed between high and low learning potential sites on ratings for five characteristics. Table 6 shows the mean and standard deviation for each characteristic when differentiated by high or low learning sites, a t value and probability level. Ratings on the level of difficulty of tasks and the frequency of adult supervision did not differ significantly between high and low learning experiences. There were significant differences, however, on the other three characteristics. Opportunities for assuming personal responsibility and for learning things not previously planned were judged to be more frequent in high learning experiences. Likewise, the attitude of adults toward students was judged to be less formal in high learning experiences.

TABLE 6

STUDENT RATINGS ON FIVE CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH THE QUALITY OF LEARNING INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES

		High learning experience	Low learning experience	t	p
The work tasks were: (very difficult=1, very easy=5)	M	3.21	3.36	1.00	N.S.
	SD	1.10	1.81		
The adult supervision was: (very frequent=1, seldom or never=5)	M	2.47	2.73	1.77	N.S.
	SD	1.15	1.76		
Opportunities for you to assume personal responsibility were: (very frequent=1, seldom or never=5)	M	2.09	3.08	7.20	.001
	SD	1.13	1.78		
Opportunities to learn things you had not planned to were: (very frequent=1, seldom or never=5)	M	1.89	3.26	10.28	.001
	SD	.96	1.75		
The adults at this site were: (very formal toward me=1, very informal toward me=5)	M	3.19	2.65	3.68	.001
	SD	1.10	1.60		

RECOMMENDATIONS

Results from this study suggest to us some important implications for educators responsible for designing or improving community-based experiential programs for young people. Recommendations shown on the next page are classified as they affect program design, the role of the community resource person and future research.

Program Design Implications

- Individualized tasks that are planned for and with young people should be sufficiently difficult to challenge them. Tasks perceived as too easy seem to turn off students.

- Young people are generally ready and anxious for mature adult responsibilities. They need to be aware of the consequences of their actions and to accept both positive and negative outcomes. Activities at both the community sites and on campus need to be designed to foster student.responsibility

- Although students want clear directions to follow they also need freedom to explore areas not planned in advance.

- Students rate "hands-on" learning as the most important factor in an excellent learning opportunity. Program staff need to remind themselves and community representatives of the importance of this feature and to build it into as many facets of the curriculum as possible.

- Educators need to keep in mind that students differ in factors that make a particular community experience an excellent learning opportunity for them. Young women seem to pay more attention to the friendliness and helpfulness of community adults with whom they associate.

- Program staff may want to do some systematic group counseling with students regarding their reactions to boring and repetitious tasks. Even the most exciting jobs involve some boring tasks and young people need to recognize this and learn to cope with such aspects of a job.

Community Resource Persons

- Participating employers or community resource persons need to provide students with accurate knowledge of what is expected and yet provide opportunities for learning things not planned in advance.

- Students believe excellent learning opportunities are facilitated when community resource people are moderately informal toward them. Resource persons should keep in mind that young women tend to be more sensitive to their friendliness and personal support.

- Community resource persons should be aware that most young people are anxious for "hands-on" experience and the opportunity to assume adult responsibilities. Within legal and safety restrictions, community resource persons should aim to provide such experiences.

Future Research

- This study has investigated student perceptions of characteristics that differentiate excellent from poor learning experiences in the community. Diane Hedin and Dan Conrad (1979) have found students in various experiential education programs expressing the belief that many of the same factors we found to be associated with excellent learning experiences are outcomes being realized through participation in their service learning programs. This suggests that next steps include development of explicit descriptions of how these factors, such as responsibility, occur in various experiential education programs. These descriptions can lead to a clearer understanding of what is involved in concepts such as responsibility and to development of alternate ways to increase a sense of responsibility in young people.

- The students involved in this study were primarily middle-class, white students in the junior or senior year of high school. This study should be replicated with more diverse populations such as disadvantaged youth, gifted and talented students, migrant youth and adults involved in experiential programs in order to see their perceptions of factors associated with excellent and poor learning opportunities.

- The instrument and design used in this study could be modified to apply to a wide variety of community-based experiential programs, some of which would not have a career exploration component, in order to see what characteristics are rated highest by students in such programs.

- As future empirical studies of this type are conducted, the results should be reviewed and synthesized. This would provide a stronger base for improving the practice of experiential education as well as for refining underlying theories such as the Social Learning Theory.

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